



IMPROVING DIVERSITY AND
REPRESENTATION WITHIN
AMERICORPS PROGRAMS

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About the Corporation for National Service and the National Service Fellows program

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The National Service Fellows program, launched by the Corporation for National Service in September 1997, involves a team of individual researchers who develop and promote models of quality service responsive to the needs of communities. The goal of the program is to strengthen national service through continuous learning, new models, strong networks, and professional growth.

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Executive Summary

AmeriCorps was designed to provide an opportunity for Americans all over the country to provide valuable service to their communities. People from all backgrounds would be able to come together to address some of the biggest concerns facing society today. Yet to this day, some segments of our society - such as men, people with disabilities, and those over thirty - are less involved in service than others. AmeriCorps is having difficulty building diversity in its programs.

This study explores some of the issues as to why this is, and more importantly, to determine what can be done to bring in those who have not been participating. Through the use of interviews and focus groups with both AmeriCorps members and program staff and directors, I have examined what some of the issues affecting diverse corpsmembers have been. By listening to what the various stakeholders have said, I have been able to come up with a variety of strategies and techniques for improving diversity and representation within AmeriCorps programs. This resource guide is intended to help program directors and others who are concerned with diversity, by providing you with strategies and suggestions to use in addressing the issues.

By first understanding what diversity is and what it has meant in AmeriCorps so far, program directors will have the background they need to examine diversity in their program. With this background, you can start to think about implications of diversity issues in your specific context. There are a variety of steps that can be taken to address the issues, and there are many opportunities to do so in different phases of the program. But what the issues are and how you address them are going to depend largely on what aspects of diversity you are dealing with.

Dealing with diversity is a complicated and extensive process. While addressing these issues may seem daunting, it is important to try. It might take a long time to get the representation you desire in your program, and you may always be faced with issues. But by making a commitment to the process, you can begin to make your program more truly reflect the face of America.

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Introduction

Purpose of this resource guide

The purpose of this guide is to serve as a resource for program staff, directors, and other people in management or decision making roles in AmeriCorps programs. This resource will help you in thinking about and addressing ways to improve diversity and representation in your programs.

On the following pages you will find a variety of topics discussed, beginning with some definitions and assumptions about diversity. Following this is a background on diversity in AmeriCorps, and a section that will help to assess where you are in addressing diversity within your particular context. Next are three sections on addressing diversity - what you as a program director can do, when and how to address diversity issues, and some special concerns of certain groups. Finally, there is a section on where to go for more help.

This book will not answer all your questions about diversity. It will, however, help you either begin to think about the issues, or assist you in continuing to address them. It is a resource that you can use to address the particular diversity issues of your program.

Background on the interest in this project

My association with AmeriCorps goes back to 1994, when I was an AmeriCorps Leader working with two brand new programs. One of my responsibilities back then and in the following year as a staff member with another program, was the recruitment of corpsmembers. I noticed that it was difficult to attract certain types of people to AmeriCorps programs. Try as we might, it was difficult to get certain segments of society to participate in our programs. From this experience, and my personal interest in diversity issues, this project was born.

The Corporation for National Service has a long standing interest in diversity issues. As part of its mission, the Corporation has a goal that AmeriCorps will reflect the face of America. Additionally, the Corporation has recently taken on an active role in the President's Initiative on Race. It is felt that by bringing people from diverse backgrounds together, AmeriCorps can play a significant role in addressing racism in our country. As President Clinton said in his 1998 State of the Union Address:

“We must work together, live together, serve together. On the forge of common enterprise, Americans of all backgrounds can hammer out a common identity. We see it today in the United States Military, in the Peace Corps, in AmeriCorps. Wherever people of all races and backgrounds come together in a shared endeavor and get a fair chance, we do just fine. With shared values and meaningful opportunities and honest communication in citizen service, we can unite a diverse people in freedom and mutual respect.”

--State of the Union Address January 27, 1998

This holds equally true for diversity issues beyond race, as well. AmeriCorps has the potential to help address ageism, sexism, homophobia, and many other issues facing society today.

Overview of the processes that led to this guide

In June 1997, the Corporation for National Service announced the National Service Fellowship program as an opportunity for people to study topics of interest to them that could benefit the mission of the Corporation or the field of service in general. In the first year of this program, the Corporation funded a total of twelve studies on a variety of topics, including the study which has led to the production of this resource. For more information on the National Service Fellows, contact the Corporation for National Service, or check out the Fellows Program's web site at <http://www.nationalservice.org/fellows>.

The information contained in this book is derived from a variety of sources. Over the nine months of the fellowship, I have talked with program directors, corpsmembers, and staff at the Corporation. Staff from two state commissions and twenty programs in nine states around the country have contributed their in-depth insight. Corpsmembers participated in a series of focus groups in three states. These focus groups provided many of the suggestions in this resource. Many other national service participants and providers have also provided input along the way. I have observed diversity trainings and called upon my previous personal experience with a number of programs. Managers and others who deal with diversity in non-AmeriCorps service organizations have also contributed, and I have studied collected data and other research in this area. This work is a synthesis of these nine months of study, and hopefully will be a resource that is both easy to use and informative.

How this book differs from previous ones

There have been a number of studies around diversity in AmeriCorps and other national service programs, most recently the work that led to the Corporation publication Practical Applications: Strategies for Supporting a Diverse Corps. They have addressed some very important issues, but for the most part these other studies have looked primarily at issues of race and ethnicity and to some extent class. This is the first time that the Corporation has set out to address diversity on the larger scale, taking into account the many different aspects of diversity.

This is a necessary step as we continue to think about diversity issues in the service field. We are moving beyond merely black and white to a more holistic view. Only by continuing to address diversity in all of its manifestations will we truly harness the potential of all America's people through service.

Definitions

What is diversity?

Diversity is one of those terms that is used a lot, but for which people do not really have a good definition. Throughout the research for this book, I asked people for their definitions of diversity and received a different definition nearly every time. This led me to a conclusion: How we define diversity is dependent on our situation.

Having said that, I will define diversity as the term is used in this book.

On its most simple level, diversity is about what makes us different. It is those qualities that define who we are, what groups we belong to and who we identify with.

Thinking about it that way, we have to be careful about the language that we use. Sometimes we refer to someone as “a diverse person”. This is not accurate. By definition, all people are diverse. What we usually mean is a person who brings their diversity to a group. If you have a group of people who are all in their twenties and you bring in a seventy five year old, it is natural to think of that person as diverse. But if your group is made up of seniors, then a twenty five year old would be the one who increases the group’s diversity.

Simply acknowledging what makes us different is not enough though. In order to really understand diversity, it is necessary to expand the definition. On a deeper level, diversity is about recognizing those differences, and examining them to find our strengths. True diversity involves recognizing our differences and making them work to our advantage, both as an individual and as a team.

Diversity is a multi-faceted concept. Yet as a society, we have a tendency to think of diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. This is mainly because our race and ethnicity are often the most visible forms of our diversity and historically have been considered the most important. While these are certainly important aspects of diversity, they are by no means the only ones.

Below is a partial list of the components of diversity. This list is not exhaustive and is merely an illustration of how broad a topic diversity truly is.

- Race/Ethnicity
- Gender
- Age
- Socio-economic status
- Educational background
- Religion
- Disability
- Sexual orientation

- Marital status
- Status as a parent
- Geographic (What part of the country someone is from)
- Type of community (urban vs. rural)
- Criminal background

When thinking about diversity within your program, these are some of the areas you need to keep in mind.

Finally, diversity is not something that you can address one time and be through with. Addressing the diversity issues in your program will be an ongoing process. People have a tendency to approach diversity as something that can be put on a to-do list. Some believe that once you have recruited a diverse corps, or once you have held a diversity training, you can check it off as done. You will find that diversity issues surface continually, and you will need to be ready to deal with them in many ways.

What is representation?

Representation means having people of diverse backgrounds as a part of your program. It is *not* tokenism. Ideally, members of diverse groups should be reflected in your program to the level that they are present in society. For example, since males make up approximately 49 percent of the population, the ideal corps would have about half its corpsmembers be men.

There are some difficulties we face when addressing representation. While it might be relatively easy to recruit members to reflect a community's ethnic diversity for example, it may not be so easy to attract, or even identify members from other groups. Several factors are at play here. There may be programmatic or policy reasons why you can't attract some people. AmeriCorps was never intended to be representative of age diversity. While older Americans are certainly welcome to join AmeriCorps and do contribute greatly to their programs, the priority has always been to attract young people. Also, many types of diversity are hidden. You don't know someone's sexual orientation unless they disclose it to you. In these instances, it can be very difficult to address representation.

Also, there is the question of whether to reflect national diversity, or the diversity in the local community. This is only an issue for certain aspects of diversity. Most communities, for example, will have approximately the same gender diversity and age diversity. But for issues like race, class, and religion, one community may find that their population contrasts significantly from another. Is it appropriate for a program working in a predominantly African-American community to try to recruit a large number of white members? If such a program were to recruit mostly white members, it would not be representative of the community. Similarly, a program that recruits mainly college students to serve in an area where only a small percentage of the population has any post-secondary education would not be representative either.

Representation must occur at the local level. It is not sufficient for programs to simply be representative of the national diversity.

Assumptions

Diversity is positive

This guide's basic assumption is that improving your diversity is a goal that programs should actively strive towards. Diversity can lead to greater personal growth in corpsmembers. By having an opportunity to interact with people from backgrounds different from their own, corpsmembers will have a chance to examine their views and preconceived notions about other groups. They may learn a little about what it means to be a member of certain groups, and this might shape their attitudes and actions in the future.

A diverse team also has the potential to be a better functioning team. People with a variety of experiences can help each other perform their duties. For example, if a team is performing service in a homeless shelter and one of the corpsmembers is formerly homeless, that member can provide a perspective to the experience that the other members may not have. If that same team were to engage in a project working with some older residents at the shelter, the members would benefit by having one or more seniors on the team, who might better understand the issues that older residents are facing (i.e. declining health, confronting ageism).

Finally, by pursuing greater diversity and representation, programs will be working towards AmeriCorps' stated goal to reflect the face of America. One widely accepted principle in the service movement is that all people should have an opportunity to serve. From the beginning, it has been stressed that this is a movement in which everyone can participate.

With these reasons in mind, it seems clear that improving diversity is a goal worth striving for in all programs.

Diversity should be a priority

The secondary assumption is that addressing diversity issues should be a priority. This is a little less clear to some people. Indeed, this can be a much harder argument to make.

A program that is just starting out may feel that they need to concentrate more on program development and just making sure that corpsmembers have meaningful service to do. It can be very tempting to put diversity concerns on a back burner, telling yourself you will address them later. And for programs that have tried to address diversity and had unexpected, sometimes disastrous results, the impulse is to retreat from diversity and concentrate on just getting the best people you can, regardless of their gender, age, or other factors.

These are legitimate concerns. However, you can address these issues *and* still address diversity. If you are concentrating on program development, you cannot forget to include diversity in your planning. If you decide to focus the corpsmembers training around more skill based areas and don't plan to address diversity in a controlled setting, what will happen when, for example, a

corpsmember makes a homophobic comment and conflict erupts? Even if there is never an overt incident that brings people's issues to the surface, people will still have concerns and feelings about diversity, some positive, and some negative. These will not go away simply because they are never addressed. At best, people will feel frustrated and dissatisfied. At worst, their unmet needs will interfere with their ability to perform their service.

And as far as the second issue - retreating from diversity and just getting the best quality people - you don't have to abandon diversity in order to pursue quality. Some people still worry that a commitment to diversity can mean sacrificing the effort to develop a program that best meets the service needs of your community. It does not. Service will *always* be the primary goal of AmeriCorps programs. A program should never have to diminish its capacity to perform that service. While it would be simpler to recruit the easiest-to-reach people and you could probably secure quality members, you will actually *improve* the quality of your team if you expand the recruitment efforts to reach a more diverse audience.

For most programs, diversity will never be the number one priority. Nor should it be. However, your level of success in dealing with diversity issues within your corps will be a direct result of how much of a priority you make it. The combined experience of many program directors has shown that programs that attach more importance to dealing with diversity issues have fewer problems dealing with them.

A history of diversity in AmeriCorps

Since the first AmeriCorps programs began in 1994, the Corporation has collected a set of demographic data on corpsmembers. By looking at this information, we can learn what diversity has meant in AmeriCorps so far. Unfortunately, there are limits as to what the data can tell us. Statistics were not collected for all categories of interest, and there are some concerns about the applicability of some of what was collected. The statistics collected for income, for example, were considered unreliable because of the way the question was worded (it asked for “family income” without defining what it meant by family). In light of this, demographic data can give us a general picture of what diversity has looked like in AmeriCorps, but not a complete one.

Overview of where we are in terms of diversity

Overall, AmeriCorps is doing a fair job of maintaining a diverse program, though not yet a representative one. While there is a certain level of participation among people of diverse backgrounds, the data show that many groups are underrepresented in our programs. With this in mind, it is possible to draw a composite of the “average” AmeriCorps member:

Female
Early to Mid Twenties
No Disability
College Educated
Middle Class

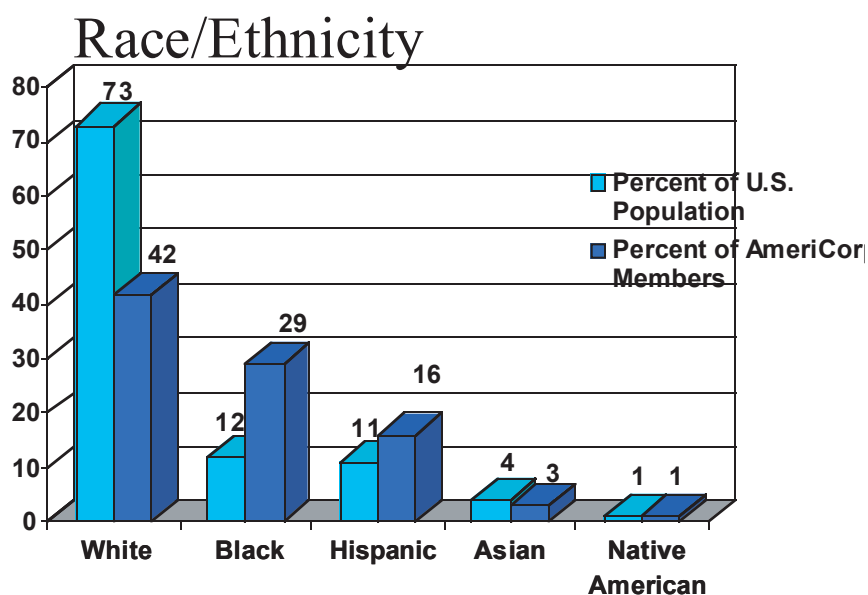
To be sure, not every member will fit this profile, but the vast majority of members will have many of these characteristics. On the other end of the spectrum, there are some groups of people who are underrepresented:

Male
White
Over Thirty
People with Disabilities
High School Educated or Less

Additionally, the demographic data we have reflects only what AmeriCorps members look like on the national level. To date, the Corporation has not compiled data for the local level. We do have some anecdotal evidence, however, that shows that while there is a fair amount of diversity on the national level, there is far less on the local level. Many AmeriCorps programs are largely homogenous in terms of diversity. They will often have predominantly one age range, or one ethnic group, or one educational level. Others will be bi-polar, with two dominant groups making up the bulk of the corps. Far fewer programs have corpsmembers with a wide range of diversity. Recall though, that even in programs that appear to be homogenous on the surface, there will still be some degree of diversity, even if it is not visible.

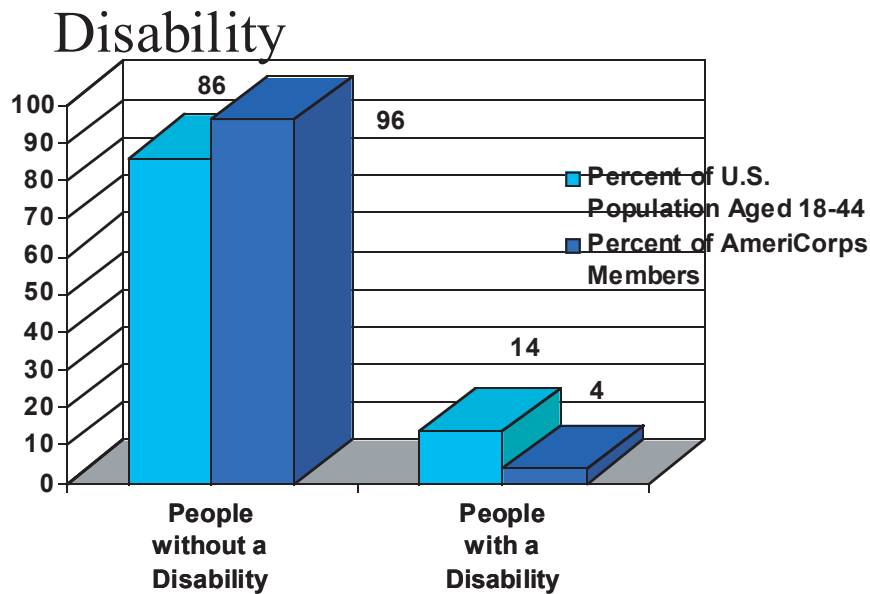
On the next few pages are graphs that examine some of the aspects of diversity in AmeriCorps. These graphs are only for categories for which the Corporation has good demographic data. Information on the U.S. population comes from the Census Bureau (1997 estimates) and information on AmeriCorps members was collected by the Corporation in a 1997 survey. Brief analysis is provided after each graph.

It should also be noted that the U.S. population figures have been adjusted for age (except for the data on age itself, and on race/ethnicity and gender where age is not a contributing factor). The reason for this is that the vast majority of AmeriCorps members are younger Americans. By adjusting for age, it is possible to make a more meaningful comparison.

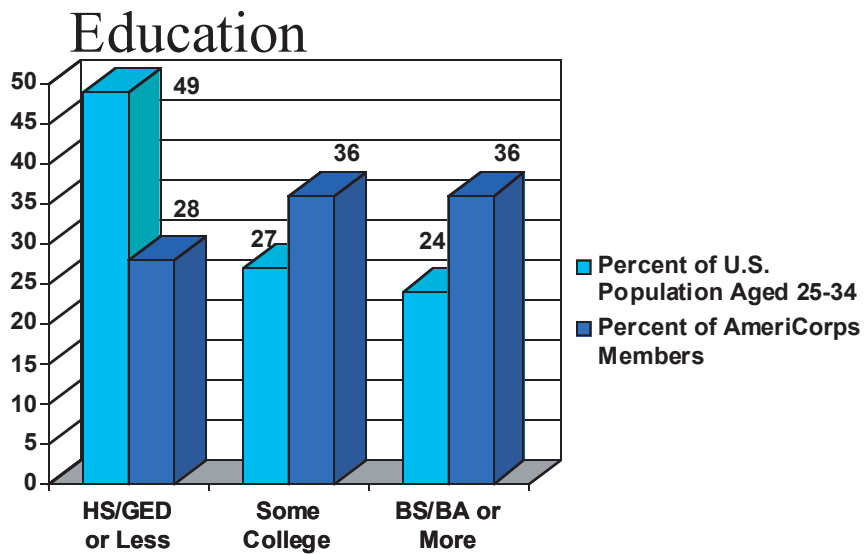


The only racial/ethnic group that is underrepresented in AmeriCorps programs is whites. Ethnic diversity, more so than any other factor, is dependent on location. Since a large number of AmeriCorps programs are located in communities where whites may be in the minority, it is not surprising that whites constitute a minority in AmeriCorps programs. So even though whites may be underrepresented nationally, it is difficult to say whether they are at a local level.

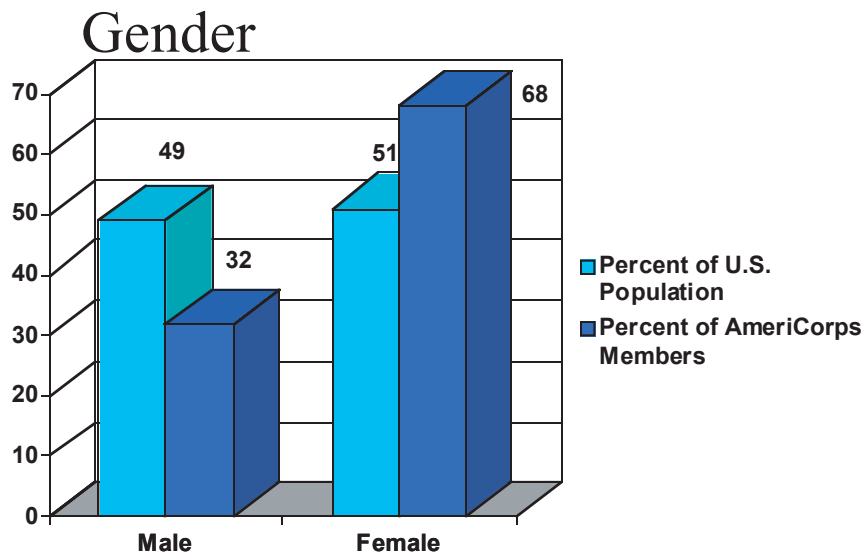
If a program in a largely Hispanic city finds that many of its members are Hispanic, then the program is reflecting the local reality. If, on the other hand, the program is attracting mainly white, non-Hispanic members, then it does not have adequate representation, even if the demographics seem to fit with the national numbers.



People with disabilities appear to be greatly underrepresented in AmeriCorps programs. One factor that may be influencing the numbers, is that people with disabilities will often not make their status known. This makes it impossible to say exactly how many people with disabilities are serving in AmeriCorps programs. Even taking this into account, it is clear that compared to the 14 percent of the general population, people with disabilities are still largely underrepresented within AmeriCorps.

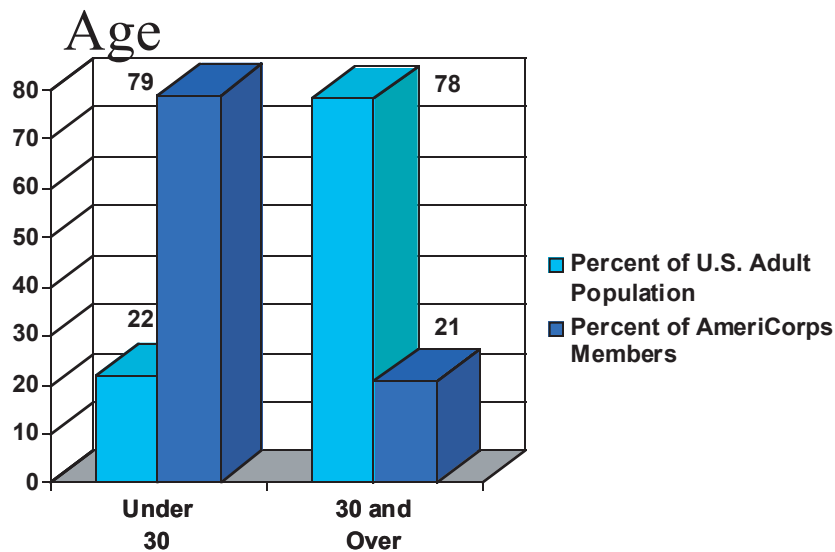


People who have a High School diploma/GED or less are clearly underrepresented in AmeriCorps. One cause of this may be that AmeriCorps is perceived by many in our communities as being for college students or those recently out of college. Another factor may be that due to the nature of the service, many programs require (or at least desire) members to possess some post-secondary education.



Many program directors are aware that AmeriCorps has a higher percentage of female corpsmembers than males. There are many thoughts about why this is so, including the theory that women are drawn more towards AmeriCorps programs, many of which emphasize service in the caring professions such as education and health. Programs that concentrate more on traditionally male roles - such as trail building and construction - do tend to get better representation among men.

It is interesting to note that among several youth service programs that pre-date AmeriCorps, there was actually over-representation of men for many years. This was in part due to the conservation focus of a large number of these programs.



Age is the area where there is the least representation. However, this is in large part because AmeriCorps is much more geared towards attracting younger people. While older citizens have always been encouraged to participate in service, they are not the primary age range that AmeriCorps is targeting. A number of programs, in fact, have an age limit. Even among those that do not, many maintain a youth oriented culture. Since the national program is targeted toward a younger audience, it is not surprising that the number of older Americans in AmeriCorps is small.

Even so, the disparity is much larger than it needs to be. Programs could benefit by increasing their age diversity.

Trends during the first four years

Among the categories for which demographic information was collected, some trends can be observed over the first few years of AmeriCorps.

Race/Ethnicity

There have not been many significant changes in the racial/ethnic make-up of AmeriCorps. The only group to show a significant change in their numbers are those who marked their race as white, falling from 49% in 1994 to 42% in 1997 (the last year for which figures are available).

Disability

There has been no significant change in the number of AmeriCorps members who identify themselves as having a disability.

Education

The education level of AmeriCorps members has increased slightly. Corpsmembers with a High School Diploma/GED or less and those who have completed some college have fallen slightly (from 30% to 28% and 41% to 36% respectively), while those with a bachelors degree or greater have increased from 29% to 36%. Interestingly, the number of corpsmembers with graduate degrees has grown from 3% to 6% of the total. This overall rise in the education level of AmeriCorps members may be the result of targeted recruiting by programs. As programs have evolved over the first four years, more of them are requiring advanced academic backgrounds of their members.

Gender

AmeriCorps has grown proportionally more female over time. In 1994, males made up 39% of corpsmembers and females 61%. By 1997, males were only 32% and females 68%.

Age

While the number of corpsmembers over the age of thirty has not changed significantly (from 20% in 1994 to 21% in 1997), there has been an interesting shift within the group of corpsmembers under thirty. In 1994, 38% of all corpsmembers were under 21 and 42% were between 22 and 29. By 1997, those numbers had changed to 26% being under 21 and 53% being 22-29. This aging of the program may be linked to the higher education levels of members as well.

Evaluating diversity and representation in your program

Now that you have a general idea of what diversity is and what it has meant in AmeriCorps in general, it's time to start thinking about diversity and representation in your program. In order to do this, you need to determine how you feel about diversity, where you are in the process of addressing diversity issues, and how diversity fits within your particular context. The best way to assess this is to give yourself a little quiz.

Below are a series of questions to ask yourself. How you answer these will help you determine what to do next.

How do you feel about diversity?

How do you personally define diversity?

List all the characteristics that comprise diversity to you.

How diverse are your friends?

Is there any reference to diversity in your mission statement?

Is diversity a priority to you, or is it often an afterthought?

What are the benefits of having a diverse corps?

What are the drawbacks to having a diverse corps?

Is having a diverse corps worth the hassle, difficulty, and conflict that may sometimes occur?

Where are you in the process of addressing diversity issues?

How many (male/female, gay/lesbian/bisexual/straight, etc.) corpsmembers do you have?

How diverse is your staff? Your board?

How have you dealt with diversity issues in the past?

What have you done when someone has made a sexist (etc.) remark?

How many diversity resources do you know about? How many have you used?

Have you taken any concrete steps towards addressing diversity?

Have you offered diversity training? How often?

Do you use and encourage the use of appropriate and inclusive language?

Does your organizational culture reflect an understanding of the importance of diversity?

How does diversity fit within your particular context?

How does your corps' diversity compare to your community's (age range, education level etc.)?

Does anything in your mission statement preclude or limit some types of diversity?

Examining how you answered these questions will help you determine your level of understanding of diversity and where you are in thinking about diversity and representation within your program. Programs are at all different points along the diversity spectrum (in both application and understanding), and people's perceptions of whether or not their program is diverse is often affected by their understanding of diversity. Many programs are more diverse than they give themselves credit for. However, there is still a long way to go. Once you have established how you feel about diversity and where you are in the process, you can begin to form a plan for how to proceed.

What you as a program director can do to improve diversity

Many program directors already accept diversity as an important value and are committed to continually improving it. Even among this group, however, a number of people do not know how to go about this process.

There are many ways that you as a program director can address diversity and representation within your corps. Some of these ideas will be easier to implement than others. Some may even seem self-evident. Some of these may work in one situation, but not another. These suggestions come from program directors who have had success in working with diversity issues, and from corpsmembers from diverse backgrounds. Don't let yourself get too bogged down with any one model of addressing diversity, however. If you try an approach that isn't working for you, examine why it may not be, and if you cannot make an adjustment, move on and try a different approach.

Whatever steps you take, be prepared to invest a significant amount of time in the process. Change is never easy, especially when you are trying to change attitudes as well as actions. You will have to work at it, being careful not to assume that people are ready to deal with diversity. Some people are aware of diversity issues but have never seen them as a priority. Others may have never even really thought about them before.

Finally, even though this is a very important area to work on, be careful not to focus too intently on diversity as you can inadvertently turn people off to the subject. Accepting a slower pace and gradual change often has better long term results.

Changing your organizational culture

Changing your organizational culture to reflect diversity values can be a long and difficult process. It is, however, a necessary precursor to implementing change within the corps. If your organizational culture already embraces diversity, you may already be addressing some of the suggestions in this section. If not, you will need to think about this first. Only if you first address diversity in the way you function will you be able to take the next steps of taking action in the corps. Organizations with a deep understanding of diversity often have the greatest diversity amongst their members and are best able to deal with issues as they arise.

In some cases, program directors may not be able to institute change within their larger organization. They may not be in a position of power necessary to make such changes. If this is the case, it might help to work with someone in the organization who can, and get them to advocate change on your behalf.

- Look at your mission statement
- Develop a written diversity plan
- Consider the make-up of your advisory board and staff
- Get key people to embrace diversity
- Get commitments
- Address all aspects of diversity

Examine your mission statement. Do you include anything about diversity in it? This can be a great place to state your commitment to diversity. Also, check to see if there is anything in the mission statement that limits or precludes diversity in any way. If the limiting language is essential to your functioning (i.e. if you are a youth corps, your mission statement will limit your age diversity), then you will at least be aware of this limitation. If it is not essential, think of ways to change it.

It is also useful to develop a written plan for diversity. State in detail what your diversity goals are. These will, of course, be shaped largely by your context. Devise strategies for how you will implement these goals and indicators of success so you will know when you reach them. As you develop this plan, bring various stakeholders together to work on it. Have members of your staff, corps, advisory board, and community all work together on its development. From these stakeholders, assemble some sort of working group to review the progress you make towards your diversity goals.

Look at the make up of your advisory board. Does it have broad representation of different groups in its membership? If not, it might aid your efforts to invite a more diverse range of people to serve on it. The same holds true of your staff. While your first concern should always be on getting the best people possible for the job, consider that hiring diverse staff members can have a very positive effect. If, for example, you bring in a staff member with a disability, they may be able to serve as a resource/support person when you address disability issues.

It is important that key people on your staff and board embrace diversity. It can't just be something they talk about but never address by their actions, it has to be a genuine value - or, as one program director put it: "Not just smoke and mirrors." Diversity needs to be a value that people internalize and take seriously. If you don't deal with diversity seriously, your members will pick up on it and know that it is not important to you. Similarly, if some staff are sensitive to diversity issues and others are not, members will trust and respect them differently.

It can be difficult to get the necessary commitments from people to truly address issues of diversity. These issues sometimes take a lower priority because of all the other competing interests on you and your staff's time. But, as a program director, it is your responsibility to make sure that diversity issues receive their proper attention. Word will get around if you are doing things right, and this can have a cumulative positive effect on your efforts. However, if

you don't make the effort to embody diversity values, it will be difficult to integrate them into your organization's culture.

Finally, it is important that your program looks at all aspects of diversity, not just race. There is a tendency for diversity discussions to get skewed into issues of black and white. Your members, staff, and board have to understand all the many facets of diversity. Race issues may be the major diversity concern in your context. While it is important for you to address them, maybe even make them your primary focus, it is important not to lose sight of the many other aspects of diversity.

Even though it can be hard, it is important that you try to address diversity within your organizational culture. You may face resistance, because in many ways diversity scares people. It can be a difficult topic to deal with and many people would rather concentrate on more concrete issues than address a less tangible, more emotion-laden topic. Nevertheless, it is vital that you do so. When your organization is more accepting of diversity, you will find that your staff tends to have greater sensitivity to the needs of others, and you can better attract and work with a diverse corps.

Concrete steps to address diversity

Once you have established diversity as a value within your organization, you can begin to take the steps needed to address the issues in your corps. Take these values and turn them into actions. Make the commitment that diversity will be more than just words.

- Start right away
- Be proactive
- Determine the issues
- Develop resources and partnerships
- Build "critical mass"
- Build representation in your staff
- Commit to diversity beyond just recruitment
- Be prepared for hesitancy
- Learn from experience
- Experiment

Addressing diversity is something that, ideally, you start doing from the very beginning.

Frequently, programs wait until they have been in existence for a few years before they start to think about diversity. The temptation is to put it off until you are better established. With everything else that a program has to do as it is starting up, it is easy to see why people let diversity slide. You don't have to. You can begin addressing diversity issues from day one. But even if you do not start addressing diversity in your first year, the sooner you begin to address the issues, the better it will be.

Even if your corps is not obviously diverse, it is still important to address the issues. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that diversity is just what can be seen on the surface. Remember that there are several types of diversity that might not be readily visible, so it is never safe to assume that your corps is homogenous. There will inevitably be some diversity issues that your members are faced with. If you wait until there is a crisis, or if you wait to see if the issues resolve themselves, you will often find it harder to address the issues than if you had taken steps early on. You have to be proactive and ready to take that first step.

The first step is to determine what the diversity issues are and who is underrepresented in your context. Call on your resources for this. This is a good opportunity to involve your advisory board and representatives from various groups in your community. You should also listen to your corpsmembers. Involve them in determining what the issues are and in designing strategies, trainings, etc.

Assemble a list of people and organizations to call on for assistance in dealing with diversity issues. These will include both organizations that deal with topics like diversity and conflict resolution in general, as well as those that work with specific groups like cultural centers or social service agencies. Develop ties with these groups and keep them current. These ties will be useful both for reaching out to people and involving underrepresented groups, as well as for dealing with issues that arise within the program later in the year. These relationships have to be built over time, allowing trust to grow. Once it does though, the benefits make it worth the effort.

As you build your program and try to increase the involvement of underrepresented groups, you will want to try to get enough members of a group to form a "critical mass". In short, a critical mass means having enough members of a certain group so that new members from that group can quickly find their support system and feel comfortable. The exact number will vary depending on a number of factors, but you will know when you reach it. Once you have a critical mass of a certain group, it becomes much easier to recruit and retain other members of that group.

As you develop diversity within your corps, don't forget to address diversity issues in your staff as well. A good staff will have broad representation. The benefits of this are many. Besides being in-house resource people for you, a diverse staff can also serve as a support system when corpsmembers have concerns. Having a diverse staff may also make it easier to attract a diverse corps (by contributing to the critical mass).

Simply recruiting diverse corpsmembers is a start, but it is not sufficient. They have to feel that you value their input, and that they are an integral part of the organization. Don't make any assumptions about people's needs. Make it a point to explicitly make sure they are being met. Make sure that diversity is present at all levels (if some of your members serve as team leaders,

try to make sure that this group is as diverse as the rest of the corps). This lets people see that you are truly committed to the ideal of diversity. Be aware of the language that you use. Are you using inclusive language?

There is often a hesitancy to deal with diversity. Some people do not feel ready to deal with the disagreement, conflict, and sometimes even pain that diversity can cause. If you are not prepared for this yourself, bring in someone who is. Facing this is an important step, and if you ignore it, your problems may intensify. Make your discussions about diversity honest and meaningful. Don't candy coat the issues. Programs that have done this, thinking they were doing the right thing by not going into more depth than their members could handle, only found out that this builds up resentment.

Perhaps the best thing you can do when thinking about how to address diversity is to talk with someone from another program and learn from their experience. Many programs have developed innovative ways for dealing with diversity issues. They can provide names of good diversity trainers, suitable resources, and strategies that have failed, so you don't have to repeat their mistakes. If you have had successes, or just want to share your insight, pass what you have learned on to other programs. Remember that you are not alone. In addition to networking with other AmeriCorps programs, you can also seek help from state commissions and the Corporation's Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) providers.

Don't be afraid to experiment. Try different techniques for dealing with the issues. Commit your resources (including money and time) to the effort. You may hit upon an innovative method that no one else has come up with. It can be a challenge, but it pays off.

When and how to address diversity

Addressing diversity is not something that you can put on a to-do list and check off when it's done. In any program, you are going to find that issues come up at various points throughout the year. This section offers three times when you can address diversity issues in your program. These suggestions come from corpsmembers and program directors around the country. Some of them may make sense for your program, while others might not. You may find that these ideas begin a thought process that will generate new ones.

You should also take advantage of the Corporation's T&TA provider for diversity issues, CHP International. Contact information for CHP is available in the "Where to go for more help" section, starting on page 38.

Outreach and recruitment

This is the time when you are laying the foundations for your corps. And, like with any foundation, how well you address diversity here will directly impact how well you are able to address it in the future. These tactics are good recruiting tools in general and may help in your overall efforts, but are especially useful for targeting underrepresented groups.

- Design a strategic campaign
- Determine who you are targeting
- Recruit for quality
- Get your message heard by the target audience
- Use word of mouth
- Network with the right people
- Design your recruitment materials appropriately
- Hold public events and engage the media
- Combine your efforts with other programs'
- Stress the incentives
- Be up front about expectations

As you plan your recruitment and outreach, it is important to design a strategic campaign that will reach underrepresented groups. This is not an activity that you can just do hit or miss. It must be well planned and thought out, otherwise you may be faced with obstacles for which you are not prepared. Don't be afraid to experiment with different techniques and to dedicate some resources to the effort. And don't expect change to be immediate. Broadening your base will take time, so be patient with the process and set realistic goals for yourself. It may be difficult, but in the long run it will be worth it.

Before you can begin your outreach and recruitment, you need to determine who your program is for. If your program is designed only for college students, you will approach your outreach much differently than if it is designed for at-risk youth. Similarly, you need to determine who is

underrepresented. Once you know who you will be targeting, you can begin to plan your recruitment strategy. But as you begin, be cognizant of the messages you are sending. You do not want to attract one group at the expense of another. And also realize that the smaller a group is, the harder it will be to reach out to them.

The biggest concern that many people have is the belief that in order to recruit for diversity, you have to be willing to compromise the quality of your corpsmembers. This is simply not true. It is entirely possible to recruit a highly diverse corps, and still get highly qualified members. It simply requires extra effort. The challenge is that many programs are stretched for resources and find it difficult to commit either the human or financial resources necessary. While it may not be easy, it is a good investment that will pay off if you are able to assemble a qualified diverse corps.

If you have a critical mass of a certain group, it becomes easier to attract other members of that group. But first you have to reach that critical mass. If members of the community do not see any appropriate representation in your program, you could find it especially hard to bring them in. There can be a perception that your program is only for certain kinds of people and they might not feel welcome.

There are several ways you can reach out to people, but there is one common theme. You need to find a way for your message to be heard by your target audience. There is perhaps no better way to do this than by word of mouth. If your members talk to people they know about the program, this can be a very significant source of applicants. If you have any members at all from a group that you are targeting, they may have a way to bring the message to others. Even if you don't have any members of a certain group, you may find that a member or staff person has contacts within it. Have current and former members talk to organizations to which they belong, or at their former schools. They can even canvass door-to-door. This kind of one-to-one contact is very labor intensive, but it works.

Another good way to establish contact is through community agencies. Utilize everything from employment offices, social service agencies, and school counselors, to neighborhood center directors, community leaders, and churches. There is often service being done in the community already, and through these partnerships you can tap into the network of people out there who might make good members for your program. By developing partnerships with these people and organizations, you can get your recruitment message out to many more people than you could otherwise. Let them know exactly who you are looking for, and take advantage of this network you are developing to reach out for you. It is also often helpful to get support and buy-in from people who are well respected and have some status in the community - school administrators, politicians, community leaders. They will often be able to lend more weight and credence to your effort than it might otherwise have.

This level of networking can be difficult to achieve. Many programs find that they simply do not have enough time to dedicate to such an effort. But there are many easy ways to build up

your network. Call on your corpsmembers and staff to utilize their contacts, especially if they are members of your target group. It is essential that you have the appropriate people doing the outreach. If you send out a member in their twenties, they may have a hard time making the experience relevant to a forty year old. Having a staff member who is from the local community talk with interested groups will be much more effective than delegating this task to someone who is not from the community. Related to this, if you are a multi-site program, it is much more effective to let each individual site do its own recruiting. The effort could be coordinated, but give each site sufficient autonomy to recruit in a way that will work the best for them and to develop materials appropriate to their target audiences.

As you develop materials, keep in mind language, format, and appropriate representation. Your recruitment materials should not only be in the language of your audience, but should also use an appropriate style of language. If you are appealing to people with less formal education, it doesn't make sense to fill your materials with complex jargon that may be outside their experience. At the same time, you don't want to give the appearance of talking down to applicants. Make sure the format is appropriate. If you are trying to attract older people, you may need to design the look of your materials differently than you would if you were targeting a younger audience. Also, make sure that you have alternate formats available for all your materials for people with disabilities. And as for appropriate representation, make sure that any pictures in your materials include the people you are trying to reach. A potential member who picks up a brochure wants to see "people like me". If the image of your program that you put out there is all young, white women for example, it will not be very effective in reaching a broader audience. Here again you can use your members and other community contacts. Get them to work with you on the design of your materials.

As you spread the word about your program, you may try to hold public events and engage the media. Often times it may be difficult to get the media interested in your program. If someone on your staff or board has experience working with the media, it can be a great advantage for you. Make sure that you use the right media for the audience you are trying to reach, too. A press release in the mainstream newspaper will reach a certain group of people, while a story in a smaller publication, one that targets a certain population will reach another. Many communities have volunteer radio stations or public access TV that may be a good source for you.

Think too, about what you present in the media. People have described one national AmeriCorps television ad as being much like MTV. This is fine for reaching a certain audience, but does not do so well with others. How you present your program shapes how well you get your message out to the right people. As an example, very few programs have had success placing ads in the newspaper. One program that had more luck with this method placed the ad as a job opportunity rather than a service opportunity. They were trying to reach lower income men and were successful.

You can also make your program known by taking part in public events, such as community fairs and service days sponsored by other organizations. If you choose events that are designed to

attract the people you are interested in, this can be a very effective method. Occasionally, organizations that are holding these events will charge you a fee for table space, etc. If you cannot pay the fee but are still interested in being a part of the event, try to negotiate an exchange of services or some other arrangement so you can participate.

One very innovative approach that some programs are taking is to combine their recruitment efforts with those of other area programs. This of course will only work in communities with more than one AmeriCorps program. If you try it, a collaborative approach can be a very fruitful way to stretch your resources while attracting the broadest range of applicants.

No matter how you reach your audience, it can be difficult to sell people on the idea of doing a year of service while receiving only a small living allowance. There are many ways to make your program more attractive to a diverse group of applicants. For many people, the somewhat vague concept of just providing service to their community is not enough of a draw.

In these cases, it can be helpful to stress the more concrete rewards members will receive. The training provided, the education award, child care and health care are all ways to attract people. And you can make these even more attractive by being ready to help them use the benefits. Knowing that someone will be able to assist them in cutting through the red tape can be a benefit in and of itself. Some programs have even offered other benefits to members. Work with applicants to find a placement near their home so they do not have to worry about transportation. Offer to help them find housing. Some programs have arranged for group housing, and others have even developed partnerships with local housing agencies to offer low cost or subsidized housing for members. Be creative. For people whose life circumstances may be preventing them from participating, you may need to spend some time to help them work out solutions. If you can share any success stories of members that have come from similar backgrounds, these can be incentives too.

These are all ways to make your program attractive to a diverse range of people. Some will work better in a certain program's context than others.

Whatever approaches you use to recruit, be honest about expectations - both what prospective members can expect from the program and what the program will expect from them. Don't make your experience sound like something it is not. Some programs have offered open workshops for potential members, so they can gain a better understanding of AmeriCorps before making a commitment. Others have taken it a step further by offering potential members a short term alternative way to serve with their program first. Still others require potential members to go through a process of orientation and shadowing current members before starting their service. These strategies may seem like a bit much, but they will pay off down the road with a higher retention rate.

Training

Now that you have a team assembled which may or may not be as diverse as you would like, it's time to think about the implications of their diversity (or lack thereof) on themselves. The best way to address these implications is through a series of diversity trainings.

- Start diversity training right away
- Continue throughout the year
- Make your training plan appropriate to your needs
- Choose your trainer and design the training carefully
- Train the staff as well

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to address diversity through training is to start right away. Sometimes a program will wait until a problem arises before planning any diversity training. By then it is too late. It is much better to have your planning done beforehand and to offer diversity training from the beginning. By being proactive, you will find that the issues are much easier to deal with before they cause a crisis.

The training that you offer at the start of the year should not be the only one. Programs that have most effectively dealt with diversity have offered a series of trainings throughout the year. If, despite all the trainings you conduct, you are still faced with a crisis, have a plan ready to deal with it. This may or may not involve additional trainings, but you should also have some concrete steps ready to take. There can be a temptation, especially if you think that you have received enough training, to ignore the problem and hope it resolves itself or goes away.

Planning for and developing your trainings needs to be a well thought out process. There are many types of diversity training available. Exactly what your training will look like will depend upon the needs of your program. One important step to take is to involve your corpsmembers in the planning process. Find out what they see as the major diversity issues. Determine what level they are on in dealing with the issues themselves. Some members may only be ready to start addressing what diversity is and what it means to them. Others will have had more experience with diversity and may be ready to explore their actions and learn how to confront some of the deeper issues. Most trainers will work with you to customize the trainings to fit your needs.

Choosing a trainer carefully is perhaps the most important step in designing a training. No matter what level or what topics the diversity training is on, it should involve an open and honest discussion. It should push the comfort zones of the members, and it must be handled well to help them integrate the experience. The trainer has the capacity to make or break a training. If they are not prepared to deal with issues that come up, or if they cannot go as in-depth as the

corpsmembers would like, an otherwise useful training will be ineffective. The trainer has to establish a trusting relationship with the members and must engage them in the dialogue. This cannot be overstated. Many training opportunities have been wasted because the program chose the wrong trainer.

Other factors that affect the usefulness of a training include how substantial it is, the appropriateness of the materials, and whether it was offered at the right time of the year for the subject matter being discussed. The training also has to be engaging for the members. Diversity can be a very weighty topic, and if you make it too painful to talk about, people will not want to broach the difficult issues.

As you plan for training the members, don't forget to offer training to others as well. Program staff, especially those who interact with members, should be trained in diversity issues. Some of them may not even be aware of diversity issues. This holds true for program directors as well.

Diversity training is an ongoing process. It is useful to look at diversity training as a type of experiential education. People take what they learn in a training environment and have the opportunity to reflect on it and implement it in a real world setting. This will shape their experiences and ultimately form the basis for future training opportunities. But because much of the training in diversity involves personal growth, it is less quantifiable. Therefore, there may be some resistance to it. As you address this issue, don't allow yourself to get too bogged down with any one model of dealing with diversity. If you find that a particular model is not working for you, experiment with other approaches.

Programming

Once your members are in place and trained, diversity issues do not go away. Be aware of the messages that you send through your programming. Do any of your activities either exclude some groups of people or send the wrong message? No matter what a person's diversity, they should feel like you value their input and that they are an integral part of the program.

- Make your service descriptions and activities inclusive
- Define who your program is for
- Examine your program requirements, content area, and structure
- Provide opportunities for interaction among diverse members
- Staff should be ready to offer support

Look at your service descriptions and activities and see if they can be modified to make them more inclusive. For example, when you design service schedules with your members, have you been willing to arrange a schedule so that a member with school age children can do most of their service while their children are in school? Have you scheduled any mandatory trainings or activities during the school vacation days?

It can also be useful to have a variety of service opportunities so that members will be able to contribute at the level of their own ability and utilizing their particular skills and talents. If you are working in an educational setting and have a member with no formal higher education but a talent in art, that person may not be the best candidate for a high school English tutor. You could, however, use them to facilitate an after school art club.

Define who your program is for. Depending on your focus, it may not be for everyone and this will affect your diversity. A youth oriented program and a professional corps will both be targeted towards a specific audience. This does not mean that there won't be diversity, but that the diversity issues will be different.

Similarly, some program requirements may keep people away, i.e. the need for a vehicle in a rural program, which keeps away people who either cannot drive or do not own a car. If these requirements are essential, then there isn't anything you can do. If they are not essential, then you can try to make reasonable accommodations so that a more diverse group of people will be able to participate.

The content area of a program also determines what the diversity issues will be. Different kinds of people will be attracted to different kinds of programs. A program like an environmental corps that has mostly men and a small number of women will face very different issues than a program like an education corps that has mostly women and a small number of men.

Finally, the way a program is set up also shapes the diversity issues. If your corps has members serving individually, they may be less likely to be faced with issues of working with people from different backgrounds, and you might be less prepared should problems arise. If on the other hand, your corps has people serving on teams, then more of the interpersonal issues will come into play. Additionally, programs that have a more rigid structure, such as some that base themselves on a military model will have less flexibility in dealing with diversity issues than a more loosely structured corps.

Even if you do have a diverse corps, it does not guarantee smooth sailing. You might find that some cliques will form. It is common for people to feel the most comfortable associating with others with whom they can identify.

You can counteract this by providing opportunities for them to work with people they might not otherwise choose to. Getting people to serve on committees or working groups is one good way to do this. This heightened exposure might bring other diversity issues to the forefront, but as long as you are prepared to deal with them, there shouldn't be a problem.

When members have diversity concerns they should feel like they can go to the staff and discuss them. Staff should be ready for this role and be prepared to offer support where it is needed. If members don't feel that there is a forum for dealing with these issues, they may become frustrated and further problems may develop.

Different concerns for different groups

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for addressing diversity issues. The challenges you face in thinking about diversity will depend on the aspects of diversity that you are looking at. Issues that you consider when you address age diversity are going to be different from issues that you consider when you address socio-economic diversity. You might find, for example, that a strategy that is very effective for recruiting one group of people fails miserably when you try to use it with another group.

The strategies and suggestions in this section come from corpsmembers who participated in a series of focus groups around the country. As people who identify with these groups, they were able to provide insight into how programs might deal with some specific concerns faced by certain individuals.

Socio-economic status

Many of the concerns for people of lower socio-economic status will be financial. While they might be interested in service, the low level of the living allowance may be a deterrent. This is especially true if they are trying to raise a family or if this is their only source of income. It can be hard to serve if you have to worry about your financial state. Additionally, if potential members have been receiving public assistance, they may lose some of their benefits by joining AmeriCorps. At the same time, some of the financial benefits can be used to draw lower income people into your program - the child and health care, the education award. Some programs have even offered housing assistance for corpsmembers, either through a partnership with a local housing agency, or through some type of group housing etc.

Some lower socio-economic status people may have less experience in the work place. You can appeal to them by stressing service as an opportunity to develop more skills and increase future employability. For people who may have received help from others in the past, service can be an opportunity for them to give back. You also need to be aware of any program requirements that might keep some people away, i.e. the need for members to have their own vehicle.

Disenfranchisement

Many people in our society are disenfranchised: the homeless and recently homeless, people with a criminal history, people with a history of mental illness or institutionalization. For some, community service may not be appropriate, but for others it can be a starting point, a way back into the mainstream of society. AmeriCorps is not supposed to be about providing people with job skills. AmeriCorps is not intended to be a “second chance” program for people. Nevertheless, disenfranchised people can benefit from service, just like anybody else.

Service can be an empowering experience, and people who have never felt empowered before may find that AmeriCorps gives them a sense of confidence and worth. The education award can be a

big part of this too, especially for people who may want to go to school but have never had an opportunity. Also, while you work to empower the members, acknowledge that they may be dealing with additional concerns. Offer them help outside of your program. Provide them with resources or guidance for addressing their individual issues.

Some people are concerned with retention rates when dealing with disenfranchised people. They worry that these members may not be able to make the commitment or may leave if they get a better opportunity. If this is a concern, you can develop a process for people to learn about your program and be evaluated before they sign on. Provide an opportunity for potential recruits to shadow a corpsmember or otherwise become engaged in a project before they become a member.

Age

AmeriCorps is predominantly a youth oriented program. This does not mean that programs should not be actively taking steps to involve older people. Many programs have successfully integrated members in their eighties with wonderful results. However, in order to do this, programs need to make sure that they are not focused on youth to the extent that they alienate others who may want to become involved. In the words of one corpsmember, make the programs and the image they portray “less like MTV”.

One possible explanation as to why it is harder to reach people over thirty is that today many youths are exposed to service in school. Even ten years ago service was not as integrated into the educational system. Additionally, it is possible that programs may not be attracting seniors (those over sixty) because they are getting involved in the National Senior Service Corps programs. The Senior Corps however, provides a different kind of service opportunity, and many older citizens would like the AmeriCorps experience.

Appeal to older people by presenting service as an opportunity to share their life experience, and utilize this experience in the types of service they provide. Programs that do this, such as some of the “professional” corps, do attract older members. When you reach out to them, make sure that they see that other people their age are involved in service. If you send a corpsmember in their twenties out to try to recruit someone in their forties, you will have less luck than if you send someone of a closer age.

There are many ways to recruit older corpsmembers. You can hold awareness events in places where you are likely to find people over thirty, such as book stores and conferences. To reach seniors, utilize different media, i.e. Modern Maturity magazine, and organizations geared towards older people, i.e. a retired teachers organization. Bring your message to the places where it will most likely be heard by this group, such as centers for independent living or senior centers.

Finally, like with all groups, acknowledge that their concerns will be different. Older corpsmembers may have different health concerns. They may find it challenging to deal with

people of different maturity levels. They will often have a better sense of what they will and will not put up with. Be up front about what they can expect in your program.

Among all those over thirty, there is a subset of people who are re-entering the workforce. These may be former stay-at-home parents, people who have had long term illnesses or injuries that prevented them from working, or people who have not been working because they were laid-off or unable to find work. Regardless of their situation, members of this group make good candidates for service.

For many of these people, AmeriCorps could be a way to transition back into the work place. They would have an opportunity to actively be doing something worthwhile as they readjust to a “work” environment. Also, their service could provide them with an opportunity to develop additional skills and improve their future employability. Their service will also look good on a résumé, which will help them in their transition.

Sexual orientation

People of all sexual orientations participate in AmeriCorps programs and are present in every community around the country. There are many issues that non-heterosexual corpsmembers face that are unique to this group, and are sometimes not easy to deal with.

Some people are open about their sexual orientation, while others choose not to disclose it. Just because nobody is “out” in your program, don't assume that everyone is heterosexual. People choose to be out or not for many reasons. One important reason is safety. There is a significant amount of misunderstanding and hatred in our society toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered people. In many states it is still legal to discriminate against this group. Homophobia is still quite common, and in some settings is not necessarily seen as a problem. If you model your program to create an environment of safety for people no matter their sexual orientation, you will be better prepared to deal with issues should they arise, and your members will feel more confident in approaching you with their concerns.

There is no particular way to perform outreach to non-heterosexuals, other than by promoting your organization as one that is open and accepting. Make sure that you include sexual orientation in your non-discrimination statement, and include discussions on sexuality when you talk about other diversity issues. Also, if you develop ties with organizations in your community that address lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered issues, they can help to spread the message to their constituency.

Finally, one compounding factor to keep in mind is that identities change. While some people will determine their sexual orientation as children, others may not until they are adults. It is quite possible that someone could start the program identifying as one orientation, and realize that they are another during the course of the service year. Providing a supportive environment will help that person through what can be a difficult personal transition.

Disability

Across the nation, people with disabilities are greatly underrepresented in AmeriCorps programs. This is such a major concern that the Corporation even has a T&TA provider for disability issues. Access AmeriCorps has resources and materials available to programs and state commissions, and they are available to help you with any concerns you have that deal with people with disabilities in AmeriCorps. Contact information for Access AmeriCorps is available in the “Where to go for more help” section, starting on page 38. Some state commissions also have a staff member who works with disability issues.

There are many ways you can make your program more disability-friendly. Look at the way your program is structured. If there are any service requirements that are limiting, evaluate them to determine whether they are an essential or non-essential part of the service. Programs that require people to have their own car will keep away people who cannot drive. Be prepared to make reasonable accommodations (as required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)). Perhaps a person who cannot drive could be paired with someone else who can. Sometimes you can remove a barrier by simply rewording a requirement. For example, you could change a requirement that a member be able to lift heavy weights to requiring that they be able to *move* heavy weights. However, there may be some essential functions that you cannot change. A program that uses corpsmembers as tutors at a high school may not be able to accommodate a person with a cognitive or learning disability. A solution here would be to determine if there are other roles the corpsmember could play, while ensuring that it is still meaningful service. Develop a specific list of skills, abilities, etc. that members need in order to participate and make this list realistic.

Other ways to make your program disability-friendly include having a Telecommunications Devices for the Deaf (TDD) number, making sure that you offer materials in alternative formats, and using inclusive language. Include “People with disabilities encouraged to apply” on applications and a question “Do you need any accommodations?” on invitations to events. It would also be useful for you to do an accessibility survey: Do you have ramps available? Do you have sign language interpreters? Where can you get documents prepared in alternative formats? Are there any physical barriers at the service sites?

It is important that every program director learns about the ADA. Some people still do not understand what is required of them. You must be ready to make reasonable accommodations for people, but this does not mean you have to change the nature of your program or single people out. Also, it’s good to remember that most reasonable accommodations are low or no cost, and that AmeriCorps has some money budgeted for programs to make these accommodations.

If your program has an advisory board, it is a good idea to get someone from a local agency that deals with disability issues to sit on it. They could be a good resource for recruiting, training, and collaborating on projects.

When you try to recruit for people with disabilities, you will find many significant barriers. The biggest challenge is that people with disabilities are often concerned about losing their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. In reality this is more of a perception problem. While members may lose some benefits, Social Security offers incentives to people for working. You can learn more about how this works through Access AmeriCorps. Educate people about this, and they will be more likely to join.

It can be difficult to reach people with disabilities. You will need to find different ways to get the word out to them. Develop partnerships with agencies that work with people with disabilities - they will have access to this group. There are disability chat rooms on the internet that can be used to recruit people. It's also very important that you take the initiative to reach out to them. You can't just put out a public service announcement and wait for them to come to you.

As you go through the outreach and recruitment process, allow yourself enough time to make reasonable accommodations if necessary. Also stress that AmeriCorps service is a way for people to build life skills, and can be a way into the mainstream for people with disabilities who may feel isolated from it.

There is a perception that people with disabilities are not capable of doing the same work as those without disabilities. While they do have some limitations, it is important to focus more on a person's capabilities than their shortcomings.

When dealing with disability issues within your corps, there are several points to consider. You might find that attitudes towards people with disabilities will depend on other aspects of your corps' diversity. Different cultures view people with disabilities differently. Take this into account as you address the issues. Also, there will be different kinds of issues depending on the disabilities people have. Not all people will disclose their disability either, and this presents a challenge in addressing their needs. Finally, there is a tendency to leave disability out of diversity discussions. It is as important to address disability issues as it is to address any other type of diversity issues.

Race/Ethnicity

Most communities include people from more than one ethnic group. Even if one group makes up the overwhelming majority of the local population, it is likely that there are a few people out there who identify with a different ethnicity, and who may make a valuable addition to your corps. Sometimes, however, a group may be present in the community, but not in the area where your service is done. There are two ways to address this. You can see if it would make sense to

expand your service to the part of the community where the other ethnic groups live, or you can try to attract them to serve in a different part of the community than their own. While it may not always make sense to move your program into a new area (i.e. if your services are not needed there), it can be difficult to attract people to serve outside of their immediate areas. There are a number of reasons for this. Some people may identify their community as only the immediate area in which they live. Even though geographically your program may be in the same city, your part of town may be outside their day-to-day experience, so they don't feel any connection to it. Also, if all their support systems are in one part of the city, it may be difficult for them to feel welcome in another.

Despite this, there is still value in striving for ethnic diversity in your program. There are many ways that you can reach out to various ethnic groups. Many cultures have a history of helping out when members of their community need it. Appeal to this sense in people and build on it. For those cultures that are more individually centered, you will need to find a different approach. Some people in these cultures will want to change the individual focus, and might see community service as an opportunity to do so, at least on a small level. Also, providing people with the opportunity to be role models is a good way to draw them in. Many people like the idea of showing their community members that people "like us" can do anything.

Many cultures have community centers or organizations, and they can be good contacts for you. They will have access to people, can provide local context for working with their group, and can be utilized as partners for future training and programming. In some cultures, such as many Native American and Asian cultures, it is very important to have the outreach effort come from someone inside the community - someone who has standing and is trusted. If you develop these ties with local organizations, they can act as intermediaries for you and give you access to groups that you may not have been able to reach on your own.

An obvious barrier is the issue of language. If you have materials available in the language of your target communities, you will be better able to communicate with them. Even if you know that most of a certain ethnic group may be reasonably fluent in English, it is always a good idea to make materials available in their own language. No matter how fluent they become, most people are always more comfortable in their own language. It may not be easy to get people who can translate materials for you or who speak the target group's language, but once you develop a capacity to communicate with this group, you gain an ability to involve them.

The other major challenge that you are likely to face is the history of racism in many of our communities. There is still a certain amount of distrust. Different cultures will interact with "outsiders" differently, and conflicts may erupt within your corps. The best approach for dealing with this is to address the issues before they become problems. There are several good trainings available in this area offered through the Corporation's T&TA providers and other sources. Deal with this issue early, and don't assume that you have solved all the problems after just one training. Maintain a constant alertness to these concerns (as you should with all diversity concerns) and be prepared to do additional work to address them.

Gender

Getting men involved in service continues to be a challenge for a number of programs. Some though, have had more success than others in reaching out to men. There are a number of ways to make your program more attractive to men.

One theory is that selling a program as service does not fit well with the societal messages men hear. For some, the concept of serving their communities is a little too vague. Society still expects men to go out and get a job, to have a career, and to make money. For many men, money is a big motivating factor and the small living allowance that AmeriCorps programs offer is going to be a deterrent for them. One way to get around this is to stress the tangible rewards they will receive from serving - the skills learned, the money for college, etc. Play up the fact that a year of national service will look good on their résumé and ultimately help them in their career goals.

Related to this, some programs find that the attrition rate for men is higher than it is for women. This may be because even men who start off the year with good intentions may feel the pressure to make money and end up leaving before their term is finished. To combat this, the best approach seems to be to appeal to their sense of commitment. Ideally, you should develop this before the program year starts. This sense of obligation can also be used to attract men to the program initially. Many male corpsmembers speak in terms of honor and justice and “doing the right thing”. They see this as an opportunity to serve their country.

Some men also need to feel a challenge. This could partially explain why some of the more physically challenging programs - the ones that construct trails in National Parks and build houses and fight fires - have an easier time recruiting and retaining men. Men are more likely to be task oriented and want to be involved in activities where they are doing something and can see the results. They may be less interested in the process of community service and service learning.

Finally, programs need to make sure that they make men feel welcome. If you are holding an information meeting with parents of the students you serve, make sure that the fathers feel welcome too. Let men know from the beginning that they have a role in this program.

Single parents

Parents, especially single parents, comprise a significant number of corpsmembers, and they have their own set of concerns, separate from whatever other issues they may face based on income, ethnicity, etc. For most parents, their children will always come first, ahead of whatever other obligations or commitments they might have. If you, as a program director, acknowledge this from the beginning, you will have more success in working with single parents in your programs.

One way to acknowledge this is to make your program more single parent friendly. Allow corpsmembers to opt-out of a certain number of events when the needs of their family compete with the needs of the program. You can also work with them to plan a schedule that allows them to do their service while their children are in school or day care. Some programs have even successfully designed schedules that allow members to have their children present while they do the service. This last option will not work for all programs obviously, but if your members are running an after school program for example, it is a possibility.

Once you have the reputation for being sensitive to the needs of single parents, you will find it easier to attract them to your program. Even so, it will always be a challenge to get single parents involved. For many, the living allowance will simply not be enough to live on, especially if it is their only source of income.

You can appeal to them by stressing the availability of child care - which may make it financially feasible for them to serve. Also, the opportunity to be a role model for their kids is an attraction, as is the education award for those who want to go back to school.

Religion

There are two issues to keep in mind when thinking about religious diversity.

Holidays and Sabbaths: You should try not to schedule any mandatory trainings or events on a religious holiday, even if you don't think any of your corpsmembers celebrate it. You should allow corpsmembers to take time off to celebrate their holidays and have a plan in place to let them make up any missed service hours. Get a calendar that lists the holidays of various religions and use it as you plan out your activities for the year. Bear in mind also that different religions celebrate the Sabbath on different days of the week. If you have a member whose Sabbath day is a regular service day, plan out a schedule with them that allows them to serve and also observe their beliefs.

Prayers and services: Some programs like to start the week or a project with a prayer or dedication service. Sometimes celebration events also have religious overtones to them. It should never be required that members participate in these. But just saying that they are optional is not enough. It can be extremely awkward if a corpsmember has to sit to the side or leave a room while the rest of the team participates in a ritual.

In a society where the vast majority of citizens are from a Judeo-Christian background it is sometimes easy to overlook members of other religions. Bear in mind also that some people do not follow any particular religion, and they should be equally respected.

Education

It can be difficult if you have corpsmembers with a wide variety of educational backgrounds. How do you actively engage members who might range from having a GED to having a Ph.D.? Programmatically, it can be a challenge to find meaningful service for people with such a wide range of experience. One suggestion is to design your program to have a variety of service opportunities so that each person can serve according to their capabilities.

It is also important that you consider people's educational backgrounds when you hold trainings or corps meetings. If, for example, you make references to literature or theories to which some of your members may not have been exposed, you may find that those members feel left out or alienated from the others.

Finally, don't assume that education is the same thing as ability. A member who may have no formal higher education may be very intelligent and capable of great achievement. Similarly, a well-educated member may not have the particular skills needed for a certain kind of service.

Conclusions

Dealing with diversity is a complicated and extensive process. This book is just one tool that you can use as you work through it. These strategies and suggestions can form a foundation for someone just starting to address the issues. And for people that have some experience with diversity already, this information can serve as an additional resource as you refine your approach.

At times you may find it frustrating to think about diversity issues while still maintaining a quality service program. You may even want to give up on diversity. When you feel this way, take some time to examine where you are with diversity. If you have made progress toward your goals, celebrate your successes. If you have not made as much progress as you had hoped, re-evaluate your goals. You may have to change them to make them more manageable.

You are not alone. There are many places you can go for help with diversity issues. By working with local resources, other programs, T&TA providers, and state commissions, you will find that there are many people out there that can assist you. Take advantage of this network to make the task easier for yourself.

It might take a long time to get the representation you desire in your program, and you may always be faced with issues. Don't give up on the process. As you progress, you will find that you develop the skills necessary to address diversity. It may even become easier for you, but it will take some time.

By making a commitment to improving diversity and representation, you will strengthen your individual program as well as the larger national service movement. When people of all backgrounds and of all diversities are represented in AmeriCorps, the movement will be stronger, will provide greater service, and will be better able to make a difference in all our communities.

Where to go for more help

There are many resources out there that are available as you continue to address this extensive issue. Below are seven organizations that have been recommended by program directors and others as useful in their diversity efforts. You will also find that there are many locally available resources in your own community. These local resources may prove to be the most valuable, because they will have the experience of dealing with diversity issues in your community. They will be familiar with the local context.

CHP International
1040 North Boulevard, Suite 220
Oak Park IL 60301
Tel: (708) 848-9650
Fax: (708) 848-3191
EMail: chp@wwa.com
Contact persons: Jim Hickman and Ginlin Woo, project directors

CHP is currently the diversity T&TA provider for CNS programs.

Access AmeriCorps
1660 L Street, N.W., Suite 700
Washington DC 20036
Tel: (202) 776-0406
Fax: (202) 776-0414
EMail: accessamericorps@ucpa.org
wmorales@ucpa.org
Web site: <http://www.ucpa.org/html/innovative/americorp/index.html>
Contact person: Will Morales, project director

Access AmeriCorps is currently the disability T&TA provider for CNS programs.

ETR Associates - National Service Resource Center
PO Box 1830
Santa Cruz CA 95061-1830
Tel: (800) 860-2684, x130
Fax: (408) 438-3618
EMail: ian@etr-associates.org
Web site: <http://www.etr.org/NSRC/>
Contact person: Ian Shearer

ETR Associates has a large lending library with many resources available to national service programs, including several on diversity issues.

National MultiCultural Institute
3000 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 438
Washington DC 20008
Tel: (202) 483-0700
Fax: (202) 483-5233

NMCI is a former T&TA Provider for CNS. Although they are no longer responsible for providing support to programs, they may be a good source for locating additional resources in your area.

The American Institute for Managing Diversity, Inc.
Morehouse College
Box 83
351-55 Westview Drive, S.W.
Atlanta GA 30314
Tel: (404) 756-1170
Fax: (404) 756-1189

The Institute conducts seminars and conferences, has a speakers bureau, printed resources and publishes a newsletter.

The Anti-Defamation League
823 United Nations Plaza
New York NY 10017
Tel: (212) 490-2525
Web site: <http://www.adl.org>

The ADL has a variety of printed materials and maintains an extensive web site.

Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Avenue
Montgomery AL 36104
Tel: (334) 264-0286
Web site: <http://www.splcenter.org>

The Center has many resources on tolerance and combating hatred.